

# 12

## Southern Boreal Plains & Plateaux

Represented by: Wood Buffalo, (8% of total area of park),  
Riding Mountain, Elk Island, and Prince Albert National Parks



Prince Albert National Park

### A REGION OF TRANSITION

A region of transition, from the dry, treeless prairies to the moist boreal forest, from intensely man-altered landscapes to pristine wilderness. Within this region are some of the most endangered habitats in Canada.



Riding Mountain National Park

### THE LAND:

The topography of this region is a gentle blend of plains and plateaux, with a few widely scattered groups of low hills and wide river valleys. To the north is the Alberta Plateau, with hills reaching heights of about 200 metres. To the south are smooth plains. The underlying soft sedimentary bedrock has influenced the regular relief found in this region. Subsequent glaciation has modified the landscape, leaving rolling moraines on the uplands and fine-grained lacustrine deposits in lowland areas.

### VEGETATION:

Although this region is one of continuous transition from prairie through deciduous forest to boreal forest, three distinctive vegetation zones are recognized. In the south, aspen parkland, a mosaic of trembling aspen groves and rough fescue grasslands, is the prevalent vegetation. This combination of communities forms a distinctive Canadian habitat that is unique in the world. Bordering the aspen parkland is a zone of mixed wood forest containing various combinations of coniferous species



The south boundary of the Southern Boreal Plains is marked by a fairly broad transition from the Grassland region. This transition, known as Parkland because of its scattered groves of Trembling Aspen, offers fertile soil and dependable rainfall for grain farming.

Southeastern Alberta is the driest part of the central plains. As one travels north and east, the land becomes moister, for several reasons.

The rain shadow effect of the Rocky Mountains becomes less dramatic and the weather is cooler with shorter summers to evaporate the water. Overall, woody plants including aspen, saskatoon berry and chokecherry become more common as one travels northeast. Eventually the closed canopy forest of the Southern Boreal Plain is reached.

This region remained relatively natural until the 1980s, when a process for using aspen for pulp was developed.



Ed Dick

In southeast Saskatchewan and southwestern Manitoba,  
the flat land grows canola, wheat and other crops.



Ed Dick



### **Major Land Uses**

Logging - lumber and pulp  
Oil sands mines

### **Main Communities**

Edmonton  
Saskatoon  
Fort McMurray  
Lloydminster  
Prince Albert

### **Aboriginal Peoples**

### **Parks and Natural Areas**

Wood Buffalo National Park  
Elk Island National Park  
Prince Albert National Park  
Riding Mountain National Park

### **Further Information**



## Natural Region 12



Beaver, re-introduced to Elk Island National Park

(white spruce and balsam fir) and deciduous species (white birch, trembling aspen, balsam poplar). At the extreme north end of this natural region, seemingly endless stretches of black spruce muskeg dominate much of the flat, poorly drained land

The aspen parkland is extremely productive wildlife habitat. White-tailed deer, coyotes, snowshoe hares and ground squirrels are conspicuous mammals. The numerous potholes in this zone provide for the highest density of breeding dabbling ducks in North America, particularly mallards, shovellers and pintails. In the past, vast herds of bison ranged into this zone.

The northern forest zones, though not as rich in wildlife as the aspen parkland, are characterized by moose, black bear, muskrat, beaver, lynx, wolverine and wolf. Wood bison are resident in the extreme northern portions of this region. Some of the more notable migrants to the northernmost reaches of this region include the whooping crane, white pelican and sandhill crane.

### STATUS OF NATIONAL PARKS:

Four national parks represent this natural region: Elk Island (194 km<sup>2</sup>), Riding Mountain (2,973 km<sup>2</sup>), Prince Albert (3,874 km<sup>2</sup>) and Wood Buffalo (3,584 km<sup>2</sup> or 8% of the total area of the park).

Elk Island is a fenced wildlife sanctuary of forested hills and rolling meadows surrounded by grain fields and pastures in the aspen parkland zone of this natural region. Wandering herds of plains bison and elk can be seen from scenic parkways and trails winding around lakes and beaver ponds. Public interest in the conservation of rapidly dwindling wildlife led to the establishment of Elk Island National Park in 1913.

Like Elk Island, Riding Mountain is an island of forest rising out of a sea of farmland. The park includes a diversity of landscapes - evergreen and hardwood forests, rolling hills, valleys, lakes and streams. A highland plateau in the centre of North America, the park is a crossroads where prairie, boreal and deciduous life zones mingle. The park is the core protected area of Rid-



Elk Island National Park



Bogs and muskeg cover much of the northern region. These squishy habitats are very wet, but do not have open water, making them very difficult for people to traverse in the summer.

The dependable supply of water means that beaver find this region very attractive, bringing new animal diversity. Their ponds are deepened by scooping mud onto lodges and dams. Ponds become home for fish and amphibians, while the dry lodges host goose nests.



## Natural Region 12

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ing Mountain Biosphere Reserve. The park was set aside by the federal government in 1929 as part of the Riding Mountain Forest Reserve.

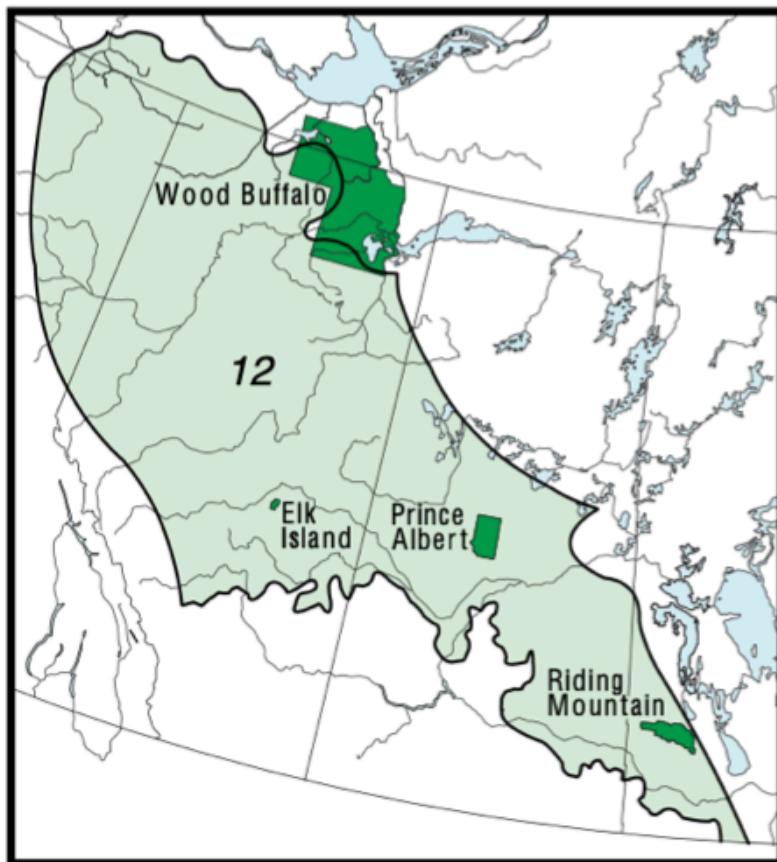
Bounded to the south by farmland, Prince Albert exhibits the variety of vegetation and landscapes that typifies this region. Pockets of aspen parklands and fescue prairies in the south of the park blend with mixed wood forests and boreal forests in the park's northern reaches. A network of lakes and rivers makes this a popular park for canoeists. For seven years, from 1931 to 1938, Grey Owl, the controversial conservationist, lived on the shore of Ajawaan Lake in the park. The park was established in 1927 by the federal government to "preserve in



Riding Mountain National Park

perpetuity a portion of the primitive forest and lake country of Northern Saskatchewan and to provide for the people of Saskatchewan ... a great recreational area."

A description of Wood Buffalo National Park is included under Natural Region 11.



Elk Island and Riding Mountain National Parks occupy "islands" of forest surrounded by crop land. These isolated plateaux have greater precipitation than the surrounding plains, giving them plant and animal life more typical of land much farther north.

Prince Albert National Park marks the northern limit of agriculture in Saskatchewan.



Ed Dick

Aspen groves cover the north-facing slopes.  
These sites are used for grazing cattle.



Ed Dick



Riding Mountain (above) and Prince Albert (below) National Parks have become regional centres for outdoor recreation and tourism.

